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REMARKS ON THE CONCEPTS OF CHANGE AND IMMUTABILITY IN THE GREEK HISTORIOGRAPHY V BC

Most of us are accustomed to the thought that in the ancient Greek world the notion of change suggested a change for worse. If everything went as it should there was no need to change anything. An individual as well as a society used to live in fear of change. Another popular belief is that the idea of progress, so important in the western world for at least two hundred years, was totally alien to the ancient civilization of Greece. Although, saying that Greeks for a number of reasons had not invented any idea of human development¹ seems a little unfair. Generally, such an opinion may be accepted, especially if we remember how much the ancients appreciated stability at least in the political sphere; one of the most important argument proving the value of a political system was its intrinsic ability to remain unchanged.² On the other hand there are several examples demonstrating positive and “natural” attitude towards changes bringing profitable results. A change as an event may be defined in a number of ways: there is a sudden change that may turn out to be good or bad; further, it may be totally independent of the human will, or may be a result of a conscious act. We could also have a long process resulting in some new reality, caused by more than one factor. Finally, a change may regard a single human being and his life or may be important to the whole society, or even mankind as such. In this paper, the aim of which is to provide an introduction to the discussion referring mostly to the later period, I would try to go through the classical epoch, mainly the historiography of Herodotus and Thucydides, in order to discuss their attitude towards a process of change. I am certainly not going to deliver full analysis of the issue, nevertheless I hope to point at some basic observations concerning the ways Greeks perceived changes in their world.

In the general Greek view the world was perceived as static.³ In the early image changes were caused by factors more powerful than human will. In the world of Homeric epics a human being was involved in a chain of action only partially dependent on his or

¹ Selincourt 1962: 25.

² Aristotle seems a little bit disappointed when he has to admit that Persian kingdom resists the damage of time thanks to its tradition and customs, although the rule of the sovereign is not supported by the rule of law. More or less the same feeling appears in the case of democracy: this sort of popular rule is far from the ideal but it proves its worth; it is able to exist.

³ Meier 1990: 180ff.

her will. Fate governed the world and all its creatures. In the “Odyssey” however, the suggestion appears that pity does have an impact on the final outcome of an individual’s life; much more depends on individual decisions. Such ethical approach becomes evident in the poetry of Hesiod. I am not going to quote his well-known views on human life and its necessities. For the issue discussed here Hesiod counts mainly as the author of the most obvious archetype of the degeneration of human race in Greek literature: the decline from the Golden Age illustrated the belief (present already in Homer) that mankind evolves (if I may use this term here) from the best possible condition and that this process is the process of decline. More drastic opposition to the idea of progress could hardly be found elsewhere. On the other hand, the same poet for the first time defined the difference between human being and an animal by pointing to the sense of justice, *dike*, given to men by Zeus. What he seems to suggest is that there was a time when men were like animals and the divine gift changed this miserable condition; at this point we may speak of civilization (of course such an interpretation may be a little far-fetched, no one can be sure, what was the intention of Hesiod; on the other hand we could assume that there was a feeling some great change that created human society). Another story indicating such a point of reference is the story of the offering in Metone, where the break down between men and gods took place (due to the trick of Prometheus).⁴ The figure of Prometheus comes immediately to mind when we trace the idea of development in Greek culture. Aeschylus made him the real creator of human civilization.⁵

What I am trying to suggest is that since the archaic period Greeks had an idea of the development, although one could easily argue that they did not fully realised its meaning; they imagined the transition from more or less animal existence into some form of civilized life as one step. It is hard to say to what extent they felt it as progress. It is possible that they simply saw it as a change. On the other hand it is not difficult to demonstrate the growing pride of human power. The famous song of the Chorus from the “Antigone”⁶ praises human might that can induce power over the world (stasimon 1); thanks to his cunning craft he changes the surrounding world to his like.

The most adequate image for the today issue is provided by Aeschylus in the “Eumenides”: in the interpretation of this drama one can stress the idea of great change in the order of the world passing from the time of cruel retribution to the period of more civilized justice based on more sophisticated principle; the myth reflects one of the most important steps in the history of society: the self-help in distribution of justice is being replaced by the judicial procedure.⁷

There is no doubt that the fifth century BC should be regarded as crucial for the process of forming some most important cultural and political notions. This refers to the idea of change as well. Political history of the late sixth century and the beginning of the fifth brought deep changes in popular mentality; wars with Persia made Greeks realise their own cultural identity, whereas emergence of democracy came as the most valuable political experience. In his most interesting Christian Meier gave the analysis of the changes in the politicosocial sphere.⁸ He points at the fact, that in the era of beginning democracy people discovered step by step their ability to bring about changes in the political reality of the

⁴ Kosselleck, Meier 1995: 9 ff.

⁵ The myth is repeated by Plato in *Protagoras*.

⁶ cf. Kosselleck, Meier 1995.

⁷ cf. Janik 2000: 29 f.

⁸ Meier 1990: 181 f.

polis. The experience responded to the expectations to much greater degree that it used to be earlier. On the other hand, the question, if the citizens appreciated the changes as such, remains under discussion.

There are several Greek terms indicating change,⁹ each of them in a little different sense: *metabole* refers mainly to the world of political relationships and signifies change brought about by deliberate action. (Mostly this term is used when a new constitution is being introduced in the city). Apart from *metabole* the term *kinesis* indicates movement, disturbance or change. In the historiography there are two notions with much wider semantic field used also to refer to human actions resulting in inducing something new: *erga* and *pragmata*. There is no objection to the statement that the fifth century was extremely significant for forming political and cultural concepts that were to dominate political thought for many generations to come, but in spite of all obvious factors (e. g. growth of the city, its economic and cultural resources, human knowledge of the world and self-consciousness) the idea of progress did not appear among popular notions. As Meier put it: “Whatever change was taking place was not powerful enough to break through the barrier that impeded its perception. Hence no consciousness of processual dynamism could evolve – no concept of progress or history”.¹⁰ It seems that Greeks could not make the last step to join both ends of this relation: the particular changes, even if considered as crucial, did not form a chain.

In this respect the work and ideas of Herodotus provide extremely interesting material. In the analysis of the issue his view of the world, or better to say, his idea of *kosmos*, could be approached from different angles. It may look inconsistent at first but then one may see that Herodotus perceived changes in “natural” way; he accepted them, observed them and sometimes looked for the causes, still there was no general idea of development or progress in his mind. Such a statement does not suggest that Herodotus idea of history was devoid of order of some kind: instead of the concept of progress he based his idea of the world on the “dynamic equilibrium”, notion taken from the early cosmologies of Anaximander and Herakleitos.¹¹ The idea of balance, that is maintained in the world, has very much in common with Attic tragedy as well. This last source of influence cannot be omitted here. In both cases, strong religious beliefs remain in the core of the problem. For Herodotus, like for Aeschylus, there can be no exception to the basic rule according to which human *hybris* would be punished, and more so, if this excessive act of pride concerns more than an individual. The significance of the other factor for the *genomena* leaves no much space for an argument: the part played by the Fate seems extremely important, although the popular belief that it should be associated with disaster should be corrected. As Myers observes¹² *tyche* usually “is favourable (i, 126; iii 139; iv 8, vii 87)”, although the expression *kata tychen* may have negative or neutral significance. The best illustration of the power of fate and disastrous results of pride is provided by several stories of ambitious and cunning individuals; the most famous of them being the story of Gyges, Kroesus and Kserkses. All of them replicate a dramatic pattern similar to Attic tragedy; the fate of great men proves that a mortal man cannot escape punishment and responsibility for their decisions. Almost all of the heroes met wise-men, counsellors, whose wisdom could have saved them from final disaster; most eminent of them, Solon, says famous lines: “*to theion pan eon*

⁹ Meier 1990: 181f.

¹⁰ Meier 1990: 181f.

¹¹ Nielsen 1997: 23 f.

¹² Myers 1953: 48.

phthoneron, and *pan esti anthropos symphore*" (1, 32). "I know a divine is entirely grudging and troublesome to us", "man is entirely chance". This drastic statement can be made less hard by realising that still there is a lot remaining in the power a man himself. Herodotus seems to believe firmly in destination and divine will, yet, his more rational instincts make him a praise men, who decidedly had positive impact on their world. Lycyrgus in Sparta supported by the oracle in Dephi established new order in his country and secured the city with good laws. The way Herodotus depicts the event shows that he had no fear of the change, provided that the change was to the better. He underlines the fact: "The Lacedaemonians before were nearly the worst-governed of all the Hellens (...), but they changed to good government" (1, 65, transl. A.D. Godley). It should be stressed at once that this positive change resulted in the condition that was supposed to remain without further dealings. This brings us close to the best solution: change, what is necessary, and let it stay. The very same can be said about the city of Athens: the great turning point in the history of this polis and the beginning of its growth is connected with drastic change – expulsion of the tyrants. The history of Babilon and its rulers provides further examples: queen Nitokris turned out to be wiser than her predecessor and left her country in better condition. Like great Egyptian kings she conducted full-scaled engineering works in order to regulate rivers, provide better channels and make Euphratus more comfortable. The author is impressed by the scale of these projects and by the far-sighted imagination of a queen, who did not hesitate to change something that seemed unchangeable – earth and water. Strong and wise individual is able to induce changes in the world, if they do not collide with the general divine wishes, and if the man or woman is sane and modest enough to ascribe to the deity the best part of the prise, the result of such an action may be spectacular.

Herodotus' most important remarks referring to the process of change are connected with the sphere of political concepts. As it has been stated by Meier the fifth century is the time, when many concepts earlier connected mostly with ethic acquired political meaning. Herodotus impact on this issue cannot be overrated. Political debate in the 3d book provides the first clear-cut definitions of the three political systems. The famous scene is the first passus where three main political systems are defined.¹³ The discussion itself evokes the atmosphere of theoretical debates and political argumentation characteristic for the intellectual climate in the fifth century Athens, we may safely assume that it has not too much in common with Persian political culture of that time.¹⁴ Otanes opinion of monarchy is highly pessimistic: *hybris* (pride) and *phthonos* (envy) typical for the rule of one man bring disastrous results upon his subjects and corrupt his own soul. Violation of laws and customs, death of innocent people, and destruction of the political order is only a matter of time. Unaccountability of the ruler and political justice are mutually exclusive. Herodotus has no illusions about the impact of unlimited power on human being. As compared to tyranny, democracy does not possess any of its intrinsic faults. What deserved to be stressed here is the ability of long and stable existence characteristic for a particular system: it is obvious that such a virtue is possessed only by systems based on the rule of law.

¹³ It is worth remembering that this is the first example of such debate in literary sources. Moreover, the division of the three main political systems made by Herodotus has remained almost unchanged; Kagan 1965: 69.

¹⁴ Pearson 1962: 144, see also: Kagan 1965: 69. Kagan underlines the fact that the arguments used in the discussion resemble the opinion attributed to the Sophists, especially Protagoras; I have written some remarks on this passus elsewhere Janik 2003: 16.

Monarchy, or better to say tyranny, is prone to degenerate and in the end to be overturned. Herodotus' version of the pathology of power makes us see that in his opinion there are some mechanisms intrinsic both to human nature and to the constitution of the state that are by their own nature inclined to change in the worst direction. In this aspect stability is an equivalent of virtue, even, if Herodotus does not speak about it so directly like the others.

The whole passage belongs to the texts illustrating the politization of Greek terminology. Isonomia, isegoria, eunomia used to describe the quality of the political power, not the type of it. The fifth century BC brought them to a new level, less general, and much more detailed. It may be regarded as a part of the bigger process of changes, however there is no point in arguing that Herodotus realized that himself.

He does not perceive changes, also political ones, as leading to any particular goal: governments are changed, kings are replaced, but all these movements do not consist in any political or social necessity. Almost all of them can be easily reversed. We may consider the opinion of Thucydides to be closer to ours, but in spite of his rational approach and his impressive analysis of particular events, his attitude towards historical process is not that far from the Herodotus' point of view, as we might have assumed. Destiny of Herodotus does not diminish the role of an individual, that is able to shape the course of history. Thucydides also appreciates the role played by an individual in the historical process, but the impact of the collective action is stressed in a much stronger way.¹⁵ As Pouncey puts it,¹⁶ a statesman, a leader or a general is obliged to take into consideration the whole body of citizens, if his activities are to deserve the approval of Thucydides. Fate, destiny and the divine factor are replaced by rational factors, nevertheless one of them still remains the nature of men, which can manifest itself also in decisions resolved by the mass. The constancy of human nature is regarded as the most decisive element in the structure of the "Peloponnesian War". Fear, honour and self-interest (i, 76, i, 75 3) are considered to be the most important motives for human actions. Thucydides' pessimism seems to be overwhelming, when with every page of his book it becomes more explicit that societies as well as individuals are prone to violence and greed. These factors can be seen behind political revolutions and conflicts. There can be no doubt that Thucydides as a first author described in details the process of such changes in the polis; he understood perfectly well what leads to the dangerous *stasis* and what makes people put into jeopardy their political security. At the same time he believed that given the same circumstances, the events would form the same pattern. The evolution of the events seems inevitable. This is also the reason why his own work can be considered *ktema eis aei*.

Thucydides' view referring to the ancient history of Greece, *Archeologia* (i, 1–20), brings us nearer to the idea of progress: one is tempted to observe that the author underlined the change in the quality of life that had taken place in the Greek world.¹⁷ Before the Trojan War Greeks used to live like the barbarians, but after the war the growing wealth combined with new technical skills changed their existence. The question whether Thucydides perceived these changes as a permanent step in the process of the development of the human civilization remains open to the debate. One should not forget, that at the same time Thucydides draws our attention to the stability of the Spartan constitution; one may infer from his words that immutability of this particular political system provides rather positive example.

¹⁵ Pouncey 1980: 11 ff.

¹⁶ Pouncey 1980: 20 ff.

¹⁷ Kosseleck, Meier 1995: 9 ff.

We might conclude this brief survey with some caution saying that although the notions of change and immutability are complementary in some cases, they are not generally perceived as a part of a longer process. For any ancient author the idea of circular pattern seemed more acceptable.

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